

ERA statement  
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FOR 1902, Film, Television and Digital Media.

## The Alchemist's Guide to the City

### Research background

The AHRC Ambient Literature research project investigates the aesthetic and location based potentials of literary content delivered by mobile apps, such as Duncan Speakman's *It Must Have Been Dark By Then* and Tom Abba's *These Pages Fall Like Ash*. Megan Humphries *Six Stories of Southampton* convey the multiple histories of the Solent river through a mobile locative app tying historical narrative to place.

The Getty Research Institute's 2017 exhibition 'The Art of Alchemy' situates medieval alchemy as a protoscientific practice, emphasising its ongoing impact across scientific and philosophical thought. *The Alchemist's Guide to the City* is a digital media app for mobile phones in which the philosophical notions of the medieval alchemists are used as a filter for the contemporary world.

The work asks: How might historical and philosophical contents be delivered to audiences in ways which draw upon location specificity and reframe contents within a contemporary app context?

### Research contribution

The project identified several techniques for reframing historical contents within a mobile app context: the use of common app affordances and responsivity while disrupting user interface norms by integrating atypical design approaches such as serif fonts and hand drawn illustration; the utilisation of location specificity via guided instructions and navigation path to maximize the experiential affordances of location; and the selective integration of historical and creative contents to infer connections between past and present.

### Research significance

The work was exhibited at the internationally peer-reviewed Electronic Literature Organisation's conference and exhibition in Porto, Portugal in July 2017.

## SUPPORTING EVIDENCE



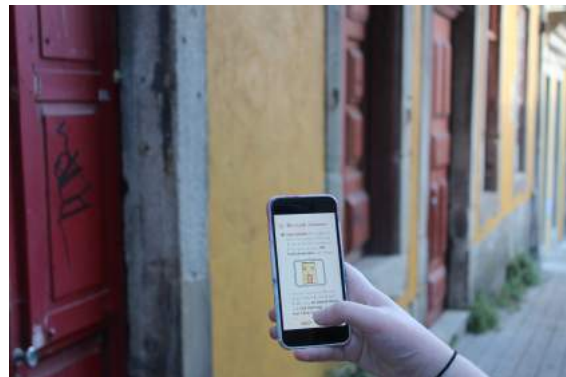
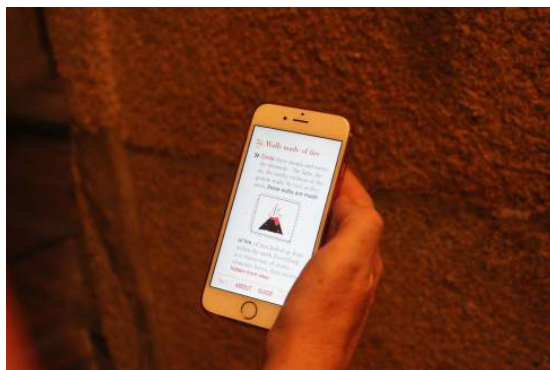
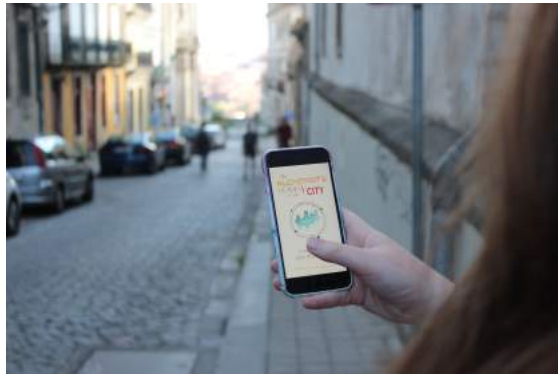
1&2. ELO 2017 *The Alchemists's Guide to the City*, inclusion in program



3. Promotional postcard with download instructions developed for ELO 2017

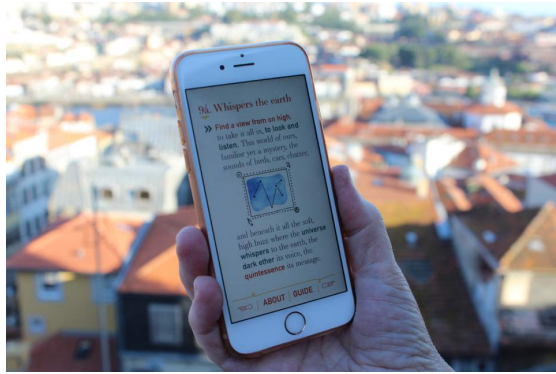


4. Postcard at Mosteiro da Sao bento da Vitoria, Porto for ELO2017



5 -9. Project being used in-situ (inside and outside) at the Mosteiro de Sao Bento da Vitoria, with image, text and guidance referencing location.

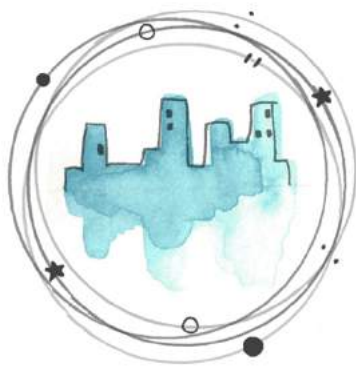




10 & 11. Further images demonstrating close engagement to location in conveying historical contents.

## IMAGES OF WORK

### The ALCHEMIST'S GUIDE to the CITY



a walk in time  
space & philosophy

Read the quotes from the alchemists, discover some of their history, & follow the brief instructions that are paired with each quote.



1. FICINO
2. TRITHEMIUS
3. AGRIPPA
4. PARACELSUS
5. DEE
6. GABELLA
7. BRUNO
8. BRUNO #2
9. LE FÈVRE



This project includes audio.



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12 & 13. Opening app screens, *The Alchemist's Guide to the City* demonstrating app affordances & responsivity integrated with atypical design elements.

## 1. FICINO

“Walk in a circular sense for as long as you can, trying to avoid giddiness, and cast your eyes upon heavenly things, **contemplating them also with your mind.**”

*Marsilio Ficino, c. 1489*

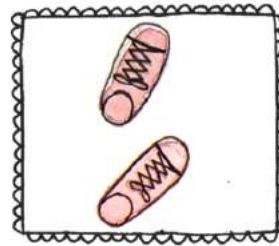


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Marsilio Ficino was court philosopher to Lorenzo de' Medici, and his keen observations of the **natural world** and the **movement of the planets** led to his writings on natural philosophy. His *Three Books on Life* linked the **spiritus mundi** - the spirit of the world - with the **quintessence**, an ethereal, **transformative substance** that permeated the heavens and could be isolated through alchemical means.

## 1a. It begins with walking

» **Commence** by making your way inside, old spaces and older stories, present and past losing their sharp edges. **It begins with walking.** and the



sound of footsteps on stone, wood and dirt. Though the city swirls at the edges of the door, it is time to **step inside.**

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14, 15, 16. Ficino quote, instruction and contextual overlay for Ch1 demonstrating historical contents reframed by location specificity.

### 3. AGRIPPA

“There are **four Elements**, and **original grounds** of all corporeal things, **Fire, Earth, Water, Aire**, of which all inferior bodies are compounded...there is none of the Elements that is pure, but they are more or less **mixed**, and apt to be changed one into the other. For **Fire is hot and dry**, the **Earth dry and cold**, the **Water cold and moist**, the **Aire moist and hot**.”

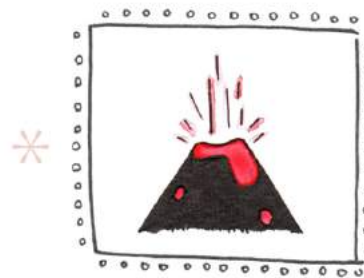
*Cornelius Agrippa, c. 1509*



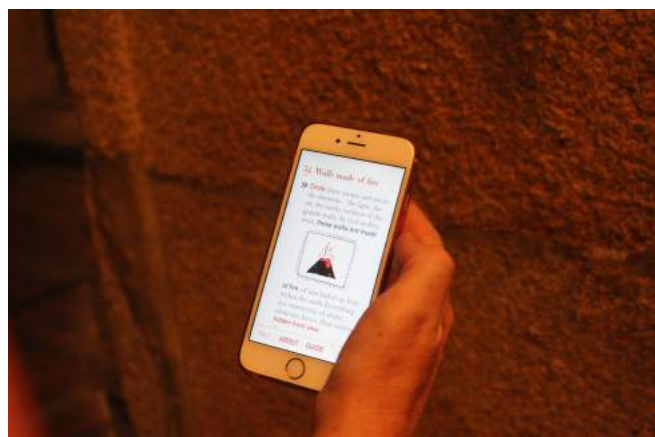
Cornelius Agrippa was a physician, writer, theologian, and alchemist. His 3 part *Of Occult Philosophy* linked alchemical processes with the four elements, the composition of the world and cosmos, and “**natural magic**” While his esoteric writings brought notoriety, he also controversially wrote that **women were equal** - if not **superior** - to men, in *Declamation on the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex* (1529). Agrippa managed to avoid persecution for heresy, perhaps through denouncing alchemy and magic in his later years.

### 3á. Walls made of fire

» **Circle** these rooms, and notice the elements – the light, the air, the earthy coolness of the granite walls. As cool as they seem, **these walls are made**



**of fire**, of lava boiled up from within the earth. Everything is a concoction, of atoms, elements, forces, their secrets **hidden from view**.



17, 18, 19, 20. Agrippa quote, instruction, contextual overlay and in-situ photo for Ch3 demonstrating historical contents reframed by location specificity.



## 5. DEE

“And thus you may understand the difference between the **true Sulphur and Mercury**, for when it appeareth **simple** it is flowing and is called **Mercury**, and is volatile... But when the aforesaid decoction doth show the nature of Sulphur, then it is called **Sulphur**... which doth coagulate, reduce and fix to his **proper nature**, which is to be made **Gold**”.

*John Dee, c. 1564*



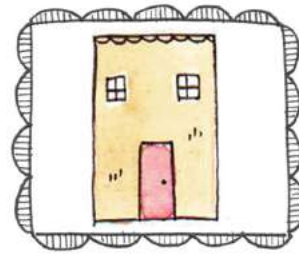
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## 5a. The truth shimmers

» **Step outside** the confines of these four walls, to the road, & the world that envelops us. If we open our eyes, **the truth shimmers** everywhere,

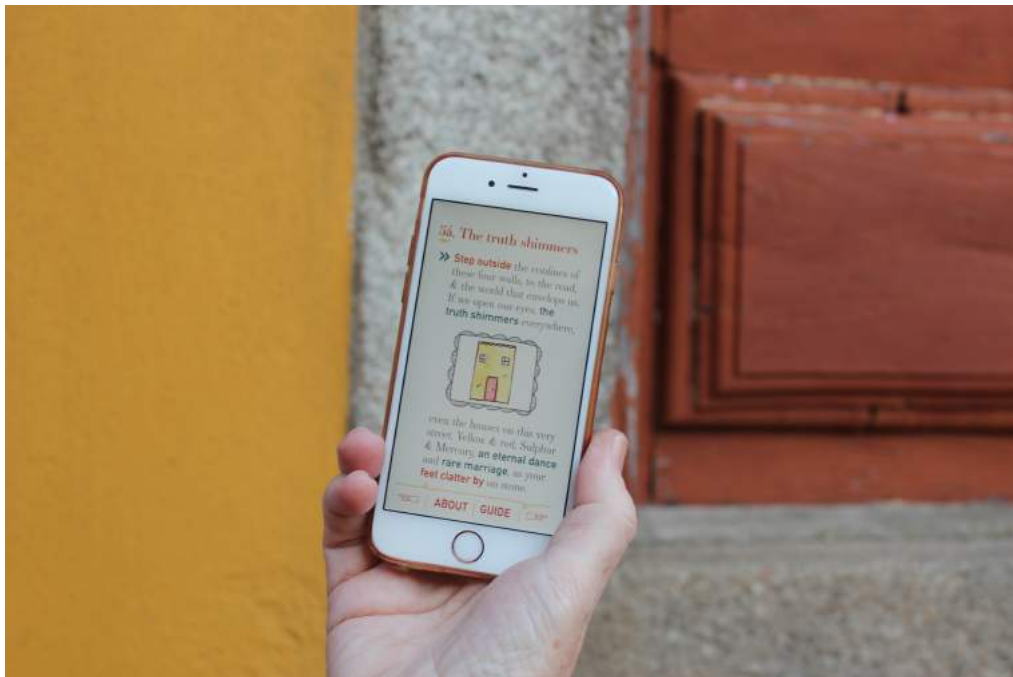


even the houses on this very street. Yellow & red, Sulphur & Mercury, **an eternal dance** and **rare marriage**, as your **feet clatter by** on stone.



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21,22,23. Dee quote, instruction and in-situ photo for Ch5 demonstrating close integration of historical contents with guided instruction & location specificity.



24. In-situ photo for Ch9 demonstrating close integration of historical with creative contents via guided instruction & location specificity.